

ORAL HISTORY — HUNGARIAN AND AUSTRIAN

The Hungarian and Austrian Projects of Columbia University's Oral History Collection

The extensive Hungarica collections of Columbia University gave me the incentive to submit a proposal to Professor Louis M. Starr, then director of the Oral History Research Office, to collect reminiscences of Hungarian immigrants who had an influence on the cultural, scientific, economic life of the United States. His acceptance of this suggestion marked the beginnings of the Hungarian oral history project at Columbia University in 1974, working with in the following categories:

1. Interviews with artists, scholars, etc. of Hungarian origin, who completed their education in Europe and who subsequently made an impact on the cultural, scholarly, economic life of the United States.

2. Interviews with relatives or close friends of these outstanding personalities to complete our knowledge about their lives and accomplishments.

3. Interviews with persons able to report on contemporary historical events (mainly up to 1945), such as participation in anti-Nazi activities, resistance and rescue operations, and who, due to a lack of adequate English language skills, had difficulties with editing and publishing their memoirs and could not record them on paper. Some well-known political personalities can be viewed in a different light on the basis of these recollections. During World War II many of them were forced to display an officially acceptable attitude while their true and better self could find expression only in secret activities which often enabled them to save many lives at the risk of endangering their own.

The preparation for recording such memoirs is thorough. The present author submits a preferably documented proposal to the director of the Oral History Research Office about the person to be invited to participate as "oral author". If accepted, discussion with the oral author follows concerning the main topics to be covered and the time needed by both parties for preparation before interviewing and taping begins. This in turn benefits the interviews as they become better structured and more concise.

Special emphasis is placed on contacting older people whose recollections could be lost forever by delays in interviewing. It has proved best to visit them at their homes where familiar surroundings, the stimulus of memorabilia etc. greatly facilitate the collaboration. Due care is taken not to overburden them with too lengthy interviews in any one session. Furthermore, each person constitutes a psychological study: one follows a subject straight through and goes on to the next one, while another has to be given a choice of topics for the session and according to his/her mood selects the one best suited to the occasion.

The oral authors are sometimes shaken by recalling historical events and their feelings have to be respected and accepted with empathy. Many a valuable friendship is formed thus after the recording of memoirs is completed. It seems that the older age of the interviewer makes recall and communication easier: common emotional involvement recalling cultural events, common friends, or the events of World War II remembered, facilitate responsiveness. You hardly can open your heart to someone who has only read about such things in publications.

Following completion of a series of interviews the cassettes are transcribed by the Oral History Research Office, corrected by interviewer and by oral author. The latter then fills out a release form for use of the transcript. After the transcript is processed, it is incorporated into the Archives in Butler Library where it is made available to researchers.

Memoirs of Hungarians from earlier projects were already available in the Oral History Collection, e.g. Albert Szent-Györgyi, Eugene Wigner in the "Nobel laureates on scientific research" or Sándor Radó, Michael Bálint, Margaret Mahler in the "Psychoanalytic movement" projects. The bibliography *Hungarian Project of the Oral History Collection of Columbia University* by Rose (Rózsi) Stein, 1978, combined memoirs she had collected with those of other projects and thereby gave a more complete overview of the Hungarian contributions.

Among others, psychiatrists, musicians are well represented in the Hungarian Project. Some examples:

Otto Herz, the well-known pianist and accompanist of world-famous artists, was urged by his family to write about his experiences and his contacts with great musicians, but language difficulties and publishing problems prevented him from doing so. Our common work was finished at the last minute, as he was hospitalized and died shortly after we had completed his memoirs.

György Sándor, piano virtuoso, the most famous pupil of Béla Bartók and interpreter of his piano concertos, reported on Bartók's last years in the USA. This was of special value to Columbia, as this University invited the composer to work on South Slavic and Turkish musical collections, among others.

Due to the increasing volume of memoirs of Hungarians collected, I proposed to set up an Austrian oral history project.

An Austrian bibliography of the holdings was also published on the same basis as the Hungarian one, combining the recollections in the Austrian oral history project with those contained in the whole Oral History Collection, *Austrian Project of the Oral History Collection of Columbia University*/Rose (Rózsi) Stein, 1980. In addition, several subject lists, for example on Music, Psychoanalysts, Women, Anti-Nazi resistance, present an overview of the growing source material.

Judging by the wealth of, for example, "Music" recollections and their general cultural interest, it may be a good idea to combine the Hungarian oral history

recollections (duly edited) with illustrative material available in Hungarian libraries or archives and publish them in bi-lingual form: English and Hungarian. The pictorial material should have captions in both languages as well.

These memoirs would be of great use to institutions where musical or East European subjects in general are studied and also to the public at large, as they could be understood in so many parts of the world. Those Austrian memoirs which have some bearing on Hungarian history could also be included in such publications. Thereby a project would come under way which could bring information to the world about the contributions of these immigrants, so small in number, but so great in accomplishment.

Relevant references

- "Survey of the Hungarica Collection at the Columbia University Libraries", by Rose Stein. *IN* Horecky, Paul L. *East Central and South east Europe: a handbook of library and archival resources*. 1976.
- "Hungarian Project" on p. 136 of *The Oral History Collection of Columbia University*. Edited by Elizabeth B. Mason and Louis M. Starr. New York, Oral History Research Office, 1979.
- Hungarian Project of the Oral History Collection of Columbia University*/Rose (Rózsi) Stein. 1978. Sponsored by the Institute on East Central Europe. School of International Affairs/Columbia University
- Lecture on the Hungarian and Austrian Oral History Projects of Columbia University by Rose (Rózsi) Stein at a Cultural Club in New York City, October, 1979.
- Lecture on the Hungarian Oral History Project and the Hungarian holdings in the Columbia University Libraries, by Rose (Rózsi) Stein, at the International Conference of Librarians held in Budapest, August 1980.
- Several interviews for broadcasting, and literary and library journals in New York and Hungary. 1979, 1980, 1981.
- "Austrian Project" on p. 15 of *The Oral History Collection of Columbia University*. Edited by Elizabeth B. Mason and Louis M. Starr. New York, 1979, Oral History Research Office.
- Austrian Project of the Oral History Collection of Columbia University*. 1980. Sponsored by the Institute on East Central Europe/Rose (Rózsi) Stein.
- The Hungarian Project of Columbia University's Oral History Collection*. Paper presented at the Ninth Conference of the American-Hungarian Educators' Association. May, 1984. Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

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